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10-8-2003

The Dwelling-Place: Some Thoughts on Landscape & Literature

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Panel: Landscape and Literature

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Recommended Citation

Norminton, Gregory, "The Dwelling-Place: Some Thoughts on Landscape & Literature" (2003).
International Writing Program Archive of Residents' Work. 607.
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The Dwelling-Place: Some Thoughts on Landscape & Literature

In 1972, the Department for the Environment commissioned Philip Larkin to write a poem celebrating the English countryside. The result was a lament for old certainties: “The sense that, beyond the town, / There would always be fields and farms, / Where the village louts would climb / Such trees as were not cut down.” The countryside of Larkin’s post-war, post-imperial England is threatened by “bleak high-risers” and a population “screaming for more – / More houses, more parking allowed, / More caravan sites, more pay.” The poet has a terrible revelation that the rural scene is not going to last.

And that will be England gone,
The shadows, the meadows, the lanes,
The guildhalls, the carved choirs.
There’ll be books; it will linger on
In galleries; but all that remains
For us will be concrete and tyres.

Going, Going

Larkin’s England is faintly feudal, determined by class and noticeably under populated. It is, in other words, already an anachronism: a place of national reverie, which urban and suburban people visit in the car but do not inhabit. Larkin’s poem is rooted in an *idea* of the countryside – a focus of national sentiment – rather than the love of a particular locality. It is my contention, however, that much of our best poetry (and the solutions to our present ecological crisis) resides not in national mythologies but in the personal response to place.

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Since 1945, the English countryside has undergone a crisis unequalled in its history. Agriculture has given way to agribusiness; we no longer *cultivate* the land, we *exploit* it. Field systems, divided by hedgerows, which had maintained their shape for centuries, have been turned into sprawling biological deserts. As a result, species once abundant have become scarce. Rural communities, meanwhile, suffer from poverty, crime and dwindling public services. The people are compelled to abandon the countryside for the sprawling towns where the car is king. This erosion of rural life goes back at least as far as the enclosures of the Elizabethan period. But mechanisation and the free market are destroying what survived of a working landscape, while EU subsidies continue to decimate biodiversity.

The historian Oliver Rackham, seeking to express the tragedy of this loss, defines the rural commonwealth in surprising terms. “The landscape,” he writes, “is like a historic library of 50,000 books. Many were written in remote antiquity in languages which have only lately been deciphered; some of the languages are unknown. Every year fifty volumes are unavoidably eaten by bookworms. Every year a thousand volumes are taken at random by people who cannot read them, and sold for the value of the parchment... The library trustees, reproached with neglecting their heritage, reply that Conservation doesn’t mean Preservation, that they wrote the books in the first place, and that none of them are older

than the eighteenth century; concluding with a plea for more funds to buy two thousand [replacement] novels next year.”

Is Rackham eccentric to equate cultural with natural wealth? Not in the least. Nearly every acre of England is the result of human activity. Areas considered by most people as natural – grasslands and woods and heaths – owe their existence to generations of shepherds, foresters and commoners. Even without studying the landscape, we can guess its history through its place names. Near my home in Surrey, the village of Lingfield means the field of heather; Farnham and Farnborough are places where ferns grew; even the new town of Bracknell, sprawling above a pine plantation, is aptly named for the tide of bracken that has replaced the original heather. Today, however, many places offer little evidence of their origins. When Bagshot Heath has no heathland, or the Fens have been drained to 0.08% of their original expanse, we have lost not just biodiversity but cultural meaning.

The poet of place writes in opposition to this process. He or she observes, and creates from, the materials to hand. We have time for only a few examples. The Northamptonshire poet John Clare (who was patronised in his lifetime as a ‘peasant poet’) was born in 1793 in the village of Helpstone, the semi-educated son of a rural labourer. John Clare’s poetry grows from close observation of the landrail and the hunted badger; he repeatedly stoops to inspect a mouse’s nest, or gently poke the inhabited grasses. So every patch of his native soil – a village, not a nation – is familiar to him and the subject of his poetry. He dwells on the subject of his dwelling-place. Like some rare orchid which withers when transposed from its native soil, John Clare could not flourish elsewhere. Madness and depression led to his incarceration in a lunatic asylum – where only the fitful lucidity of recollection, the return in memory to his dwelling-place, could revive his poetry. What is it to lose your home: not only its wider landscape but also the tiny lives which inhabit it? John Clare can tell you.

Farewell to them all while in prison I lie
In the prison a thrall sees naught but the sky

Shut out are the green fields and birds in the bushes
In the prison yard nothing builds, blackbirds or thrushes

The best of John Clare’s poetry has a freshness that enables him to fix experience on the page. He wrote for the most part without punctuation, as though commas and semicolons were so many buttons and stays constraining his creation. His poetry is rightly valued today as among the best nature writing in England; it is important in the study of ecopoetics because it melts the barrier between what we call ‘culture’ and what we call ‘nature’. John Clare needed the natural world – and the rural community – to live and create; he was diminished by the bridles prison yard. Human and ecological interests, then, are not mutually exclusive. Poetry (that not-for-profit human activity) negotiates between false contraries.

We write about nature because we are distanced from it; the act of writing is itself proof of that distance. We seek in the natural world, some continuity, the recognition of our smallness which brings a relief from the burden of selfhood. Thomas Hardy, whose novels and poems display a deep understanding of life in the West Country, sought in rural continuity some consolation for the madness of war.

Only a man harrowing clods
In a slow silent walk
With an old horse that stumbles and nods
Half asleep as they stalk.

2.

Only thin smoke without flame
From the heaps of couch-grass:
Yet this will go onward the same
Though Dynasties pass.

3.

Yonder a maid and her wight
Come whispering by:
War's annals will cloud into night
Ere their story die.

In Time of "The Breaking of Nations" (1915)

Philip Larkin's countryside, you remember, is empty of people. John Clare, on the other hand, experienced directly the poverty and disenfranchisement of the rural labourers of Helpstone, while Thomas Hardy wrote about the certainties and uncertainties of rural life at a time of industrial and social change. Their writing responds to familiar and experienced places. It reveals the interconnectedness between the land and people – that is to say, between nature and culture.

It follows logically that poetry which celebrates the dwelling-place must also care for its preservation: *because our humanity is diminished without it*. Gerard Manley Hopkins felt this loss, this diminution of his own spirit, when he lamented the felling of poplars in the Oxfordshire village of Binsey.

My aspens dear, whose airy cages quelled
Quelled or quenched in leaves the leaping sun,
All felled, felled, are all felled;
Of a fresh and following folded rank
Not one spared, not one
That dandled and sandalled
Shadow that swam or sank
On meadow and river and wind-wandering
weed-winding bank.

O if we but knew what we do
When we delve or hew –
Hack and rack the growing green!
Since country is so tender
To touch, her being só slender,

That, like this sleek and seeing ball
But a prick will make no eye at all,
Where we, even where we mean
 To mend her we en her,
 When we hew or delve:
After-comers cannot guess the beauty been.
 Ten or twelve, only ten or twelve
 Strokes of havoc únselve
 The sweet especial scene,
 Rural scene, a rural scene,
 Sweet especial rural scene.

Binsey Poplars (Felled 1879)

From Clare, through Hopkins and Hardy, the ecological movement can find a language to mobilise people to the challenge of living sustainably on the earth. And I can offer one solid instance of literature assisting the recovery of landscape. A present campaign to restore lost or damaged heathland in Dorset, which has government and charitable funding, invokes the heath in Hardy's novel *The Return of the Native*. Hardy's fictional 'Egdon Heath' is now inspiring attempts to restore the places which inspired it. We need, in other words, to value our landscape – the locality where we dwell – in *imaginative* terms before we can hope to protect it.

The basic unit of ecological value is one's local environment. National politics ignores locality; it is inherently intolerant of cultural (and natural) diversity. The Nazi mythology of 'land and blood' serves as a perpetual warning to environmentalists that we must save the planet *for* humanity rather than *against* it. The poets of locality have always understood this. Their writing grows out of the dwelling-place. It offers a vision of coexistence rather than exploitation. Poetry, they show, belongs to the earth; it cannot possess it.

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